Fabre's Life of the Weevil

THE LIFE OF THE WEEVIL. By J. Henri Fabre. Dodd, Mead & Co.

"THE Life of the Weevil," by J. Henri Fabre, is one of the most interesting volumes in his series of studies, not alone for what it says about the weevil, but for the side light it throws upon the author. Fabre's devotion to the study of insects is so marked and so excessive that the public thinks of him as primarily a one sided specialist, like the desiccated entomologist Oliver Wendell Holmes seated at the autocrat's breakfast table. This volume on the weevil shows that Fabre was a man of as wide general culture as Gilbert White or our own John Burroughs. There are passages on the history of mankind and of the physical globe which H. G. Wells might have written.

The volume opens with an account of the miniature studies by which Fabre beguiled the long winter evenings when insect life was dormant. He tells of peasants bringing him ancient coins they had found in the fields and always asking questions about their value, not about their meaning. He presents the peasant philosophy, "Men suffered of yore, they suffer to-day, they will suffer in the future: to him all history is summed up in that. The rest is sheer futility, a pastime of the idle."

Fabre disclaims this point of view. He paints the scenes brought to his mind by drachmas, and then describes the stones around him and gives a picture of the world before man as science has reconstructed it. Later on in the book he brings us back to the Eclogues of Virgil to prove that the hornet was unknown to the ancients. In this chapter he revivifies the ancient world, and one almost regrets that Fabre was not a historian of mankind.

The purpose of his searching the stones for what they could tell us was to establish the antiquity of the weevil. As he describes lakes never beheld by human eyes, when Provence was a tropical region, he finds no traces of any other beetles. He says, "Where were they, where were those who are missing from the geological reliquary? Where were the inhabitants of the thickets, of the greenswards, of the wormeaten trunks—capricorns, borers of wood; sacred beetles, workers in dung; cambi, disemboweler of game? One and all were in the limbo of the time to come. The present of that period did not possess them, the future awaited them. The weevil, if I may credit the modest records which I am able to consult, must therefore be the oldest of beetles."

In his volume on the weevil Fabre studies about fifteen species of this genus with the same intense carefulness that marked his volumes on other insects. He finds that maternal instinct is not as wonderful in its precautions for the future as is the case with the hunting wasps or the bees. The egg is not laid with as much care, nor is provision for the larvæ supplied by the parent. Hence the grubs of the different species of weevil are more self-reliant. Their method of making shelters for themselves is one of the great marvels of nature. Fabre ascribes the invention of asphalt to the weevil. "The weevil of the blue thistle possessed the secret of asphalt long before man did."

Fabre is struck with the prodigality of certain species. It sometimes happens that more grubs hatch in a certain pasture than can be fed. In such a case there is no competition. The grubs which were last to come make no effort to feed, but allow themselves to die without a struggle.

Fabre made several interesting experiments with the grubs of various weevils. He was impressed by the conservation of insect life. Each creature followed without deviation the custom of its ancestors. This made him skeptical of environment as a factor in evolution. He says, "People set great store by environment as a modifying agent. Well, here we see this famous environment at work. An insect is placed as much out of its element as it can be, but without leaving the food plant, which would inevitably be the end of it. Instead of a ball of close packed flowers it has for its workshop the open arillu of a leaf; instead of hairs—a soft fleece easily shorn off—it has for its material the fierce teeth of a thistle. And these profound changes leave the builder's talents unperturbed; the house is built according to the usual plan. This example tells us that the insect, as long as it can accommodate itself to the novel conditions imposed upon it, works in its accustomed fashion; if it cannot do so it dies rather than change its methods."

In this as in all his other studies Fabre has his little dig at theorists. He calls our attention to the fact that scientific nomenclature is very frequently inexact, because the names were given by closet scientists, who had no first hand knowledge of the habits of the insects they named. He says, "Making ample allowance for anatomy, a precious aid, what do we know of animals? Next to nothing. Instead of inflating cabalistic bladders with this nothing let us collect well observed facts, however humble. From a sheaf of such facts a clear, calm light may shine forth one day—a light far preferable to the fireworks of theories which dazzle us for a moment only to leave us in blacker darkness."

Fabre believes that the collection of solid facts is the beginning of wisdom. He speaks of going forth with a lantern which shows him, "and but indistinctly, just one of the innumerable pieces that compose the mosaic of the ground. Science, too, proceeds by lantern flashes; it explores nature's inexhaustible mosaic piece by piece. Too often the wick lacks oil; the glass panes of the lantern may not be clean. No matter; his work is not in vain who first recognizes and shows to others one speck of the vast unknown."

Troubled Lands

NEAR EASTERN AFFAIRS AND CONDITIONS. By Stephen Panaretoff. The Macmillan Company.

RUSSIA IN THE FAR EAST. By Leo Pasvolsky. The Macmillan Company.

CHINA'S PLACE IN THE SUN. By Stanley High. The Macmillan Company.

BY whatever route one journeys from the eastern shore of the Adriatic to the Pacific the roads lead through troubled lands, full of turmoil and uncertainty. It is a vast continent of impending change, and what may come out of it no one can safely foretell. We have been taught to think that the East is static, immovable; but here it is, in obvious motion, though whither it is going is not clear. It is not until one reaches China that anything can be found that is genuinely hopeful or promising as a ground for belief in a better future. And in spite of Mr. High's optimism these three studies make a depressing picture.

Mr. Panaretoff has been for many years the Bulgarian Minister to the United States. His book, despite its comprehensive title, is chiefly an attempt to state the case for the Bulgarians as plausibly as may be. It consists of seven lectures delivered last summer at Williams College, under the auspices of the Institute of Politics. It is, in spite of its special pleading, a useful book, fluently and readably written and full of data not otherwise readily attainable. He provides an historical sketch of the Balkan Slavs, of their church organization and literature, their political progress and relations to non-Slavic European powers and to Turkey, and he pauses, significantly, to treat of education in the Near East since the Turkish conquest of the fifteenth century. As to that it somewhat resembles the account of snakes in Ireland; there has been practically no popular education until within the last half century. Things are better now and the percentage of illiteracy in Bulgaria, he asserts, is very small. A good deal depends, however, upon just what one means by illiteracy.

The one most significant fact that emerges from Mr. Panaretoff's analysis of conditions is that no one of the Balkan nations is at all willing to trust any other. They may be willing to unite, temporarily, for attack upon some one people, but when the joint purpose is served they will at once quarrel among themselves. Out of this he nevertheless ventures to hope for a stable Balkan confederation. He points out that while every one recognizes the need of such a federation, it means something different to each one of the units. "For the Greeks," says he, it meant "the resuscitation of the Byzantine Empire with Constantinople as its capital" and a Greek hegemony. But the Slavs refuse to be Hellenized. Mr. Panaretoff does not think that the projected solutions of the Peace Conference—or anything that has happened since—have done anything toward settling the Balkan turmoil. There seems, indeed, no solution in sight, so long as the recognition of each State's "national aspirations" implies taking something away from a neighboring State which also has similar "aspirations."

Mr. Pasvolsky's book is largely a study of the progress of Bolshevism in Asia and a warning as to its possible consequences. "If the Soviets now transfer their activities to the Far East it is because, in the first place, they have very definite and pressing aims in that part of the world, and in the second place because they are rather disappointed with their work in the Central and Near East." Siberia and China itself are their obvious fields. Mr. Pasvolsky thinks the Soviets count on war between Japan and the United States. There are other errors in their calculations, as it does not appear that the real China is likely to listen to them. Mr. Pasvolsky apparently believes in an ultimate rehabilitation of Russia on non-Bolshevik lines that may make for international peace.

Mr. High's account of China is a sympathetic, friendly and appreciative picture, tinged rather deeply, however, with the Christian missionary spirit, which one has come to regard as not entirely accurate in its envisagement of the Chinese. His book is a useful survey of commercial, economic and industrial possibilities—even probabilities—of the near future. It also brings out the often repeated fact that the existing political chaos is superficial, that the life of the people, who are still chiefly agricultural, goes on regardless of factional quarrels. They are, however, slowly awaking to the need of a real republic. No one can doubt that it is not ability to take care of and readjust herself that is lacking in China but the collective will to do so. And that will is slowly being educated. It seems, on the whole, a movement of good omen, as an awakened and enlightened China is likely to be a vast power for world peace.

LIFE AND LETTERS OF SIR WILFRID LAURIER By Oscar Douglas Skelton. Illustrated with Photographs. In Two Volumes. The Century Company.

THE title of this authorized biography of the famous Canadian statesman by a man who knew him throughout his career has a special interest owing to the well known idiosyncrasy of Sir Wilfrid Laurier not to write letters if he could help it. As Mr. Skelton remarked in his brief preface: "He never wrote a letter when he could hold a conversation and he never filed a document when he could store the fact in his memory; fortunately, his secretaries saw to the filing. So far as is known, he never wrote a line in a diary in his life. He was not given to introspection; he lived in his day's work."

Mr. Skelton has filled two stout volumes with the interesting record of the public life of Sir Wilfrid Laurier during the whole development of Canada since the confederation. "He was the last of the statesmen who guided the Dominion through the critical period of its first half century. He saw Canada transformed from a scattered group of backwoods provinces to a nation taking its full part in the work of the world." The illustrations illuminate the text during successive steps of Canada's political progress; among them are some of Julien's cartoons, and in one photograph of "A Pilgrimage to Hawarden" Sir Wilfrid is shown seated on a log at Mr. Gladstone's right hand; in another he stands over Joe Chamberlain with impressive calm. The book is compiled from original sources, and there is a full index.